**How to help your child work on speech articulation**

You are a parent. You want the best for your child. You are worried because your child is not using his/her speech sounds correctly. How can you best help your child to achieve his/her speech goals?

**First, relax.** Look around you. There are not many adults who misarticulate their speech sounds. Sure a few people have lisps and a few others misarticulate /r/, but chances are it will all be okay.

**Make time for practice and help your child by enforcing it.**  Speech articulation is a motor skill not unlike shooting basketballs, dancing, or hitting a baseball. A body needs to practice these skills many times to change the way they do things. Your child has said speech sounds incorrectly thousands or perhaps millions of times. It is not reasonable to expect them to change after a few repetitions, or even a few hundred repetitions. For this reason, you may notice that even after your child has changed his or her articulation of a sound, errors may appear on a few choice words. An example – I had a student working on his ‘th’ sound. He could articulate it correctly everywhere but continued to make mistakes on his brother Matthew’s name. He had said that word so many times in his life that it was going to take many many repetitions to make the change permanent and automatic.

**Give appropriate feedback**. When I talk about appropriate feedback, I am focused on two areas: First, your feedback should be encouraging and child centered. It should not involve mockery, over-exaggerated imitation or have a frustrated or anxious tone. It should not occur when your child is telling you something very important about his or her life. Imagine telling your dad that you are being bullied at school and your dad’s first words to you are “Bullied, not buweed.”

That said, you have to be honest too. Telling your child that his or her speech is perfect when he or she has used incorrect speech sounds will either reinforce the wrong articulation or it will encourage your child to mistrust your feedback. The key is to balance honesty with empathy. If you aren’t sure whether you are striking the right tone, ask your child for feedback. You might even want to ask your child how they want you to give feedback. Some kids like to know if they got it right after each word and others want to know how many out of the last 10 were correct. It depends upon them.

The second part of appropriate feedback is knowing how to prompt your child to say the sound correctly. I will never give homework that the child is completely unable to do. That said, many children do not articulate the sound correctly on the first try and require prompts to get it right. A discussion of prompts and placement tips for a few common sound errors for third and fourth graders is included below. Without prompts and honest feedback, some children end up repeating their errors during practice, which just reinforces the errors.

**Be consistent.** We have very busy lives. Sometimes when an important work deadline or our tween’s soccer finals are looming, we have to let everything to on that one thing. Then when we finally emerge from the event, we sometimes overcompensate for slacking. We might have some guilt or anxiety about letting things like homework go. We need to deal with our own feelings ourselves. If your child has not been doing their homework, don’t get anxious or approach it like you need to make up for lost time. Just get back to a reasonable level of practice – ideally 5-10 minutes every day. And try to have your child practice consistently. More practice typically means faster improvement.

**Encourage Self Awareness.** As your child begins to master speaking in sentences, shift your focus to encouraging your child to be more aware of her or his speech. I have a self-evaluation of connected speech rubric on my website under speech practice. You can use this to encourage your child to think about how fast/slow, loud/soft, and mushy/articulate his or her speech is. Encourage your child to stop and think before they speak. These will help the child generalize their sounds to natural settings.

**Incentives!** Everybody likes to know that they are appreciated for doing a great job. There are all different ways for us to be rewarded. Many children are ambitious enough to want to make the change for themselves. They have an intrinisic desire to perform well and do so because they are self-driven to do so. They do not require praise, candy, or toys to work hard. That doesn’t mean that we still shouldn’t give them praise or rewards. But we shouldn’t do it often.

Other children have no intrinsic motivation to try. These children rely on us to give them rewards –praise, candy, or toys – so that they will feel motivated to succeed. Rewards will help encourage them to try, but over time they will become less and less effective, especially if a child expects it. Some children are able to work for big prizes – for example, earning stickers to get something at the end of a day or week. Other children need to be rewarded immediately for whatever they do. If a child cannot perceive of the future, it is hard for them to work for a delayed reward.

All in all it is most effective to encourage children to develop intrinsic motivation. But all kinds of incentives can be helpful at motivating children to learn.

Practicing speech sounds in words, sentences, or speech is a very important part of the therapy process. I hope you can find a way to make it part of your child’s everyday life.

**Giving Feedback During Home Speech Practice:**

**Placement and Prompting Tips for Parents**

**Giving Feedback**

Often children know how to make the sound in the word they are practicing; they just forget to use it. This is usually the first step in giving feedback. Decide together how the child wants you to give feedback. Will you raise a finger, make a mark on a page, say ‘not quite,’ or produce the target word yourself for the child to imitate. Make sure that you give lots of positive feedback. If a child is having a rough day and getting the words wrong, don’t tell them that they are doing great – they aren’t – but praise their hard work or perseverance. Praise their willingness to take the risk of getting it wrong

**Prompts**

Prompts are words/gestures that remind the child to use their sounds correctly. Most of the time, prompts are all that your children need to produce their homework properly because I do not give homework that a child cannot do. Decide with the child how they want you to prompt: will you repeat the word, say try it again, or mark it on a piece of paper. Some children respond well to visual prompts – watching themselves make the sound in a mirror can work, but most kids get distracted/embarrassed by their own faces. I find it easier to have them watch my face as I make the sound with them.

It is easier to repeat words than it is to produce them on your own. So if a child can produce them independently, avoid saying the word first for them. Some children have difficulty accepting constructive criticism from parents (my daughter is one of them). In that case, try to find a more neutral person for the child to practice with or put most of the responsibility in the child’s hands. It will make things less contentious.

**Placement tips for getting the sound right:**

If your child is still working on making sure that the sound they use is correct, they will need placement instructions. Here are some basic placement instructions for a few of the common sound errors in third and fourth grades. Placement cues depend upon using the right vocabulary to help your child know what you want them to do. For that reason, I am including a simple picture of a tongue here to let you know the three parts of the tongue I refer to in therapy: the tip, the blade, and the back. Your child may not remember these names but they can look at the picture to refresh their memories.

tip

blade

back

 **‘sh’**

If the child is making an /s/ instead tell them to pull their tongue back. The blade of their tongue should be closer to the roof of the mouth to make this sound. Then the air shoots out through that little tunnel.

If the child is making the sound laterally (from the sides of the mouth), it is important to remind the child to shoot the air down the tube between his/her tongue and the roof of the mouth. You will know the sound is lateral because it will sound like the child has lots of saliva in his/her mouth.

**‘ch’**

If the child is making an ‘sh’ instead of a ‘ch’, remind them to stop the air with a /t/ before making the ‘ch’sound (‘ch’ is just /t/ plus ‘sh’)

If the child is making the sound laterally (from the sides of the mouth), it is important to remind the child to close off the air then shoot the air down the tube between his/her tongue and the roof of the mouth. You will know the sound is lateral because it will sound like the child has lots of saliva in his/her mouth.

**/s/**

If the child is making a ‘th’ instead of an /s/ ask them to put the tip of his/her tongue close to the roof of the mouth behind the teeth and shoot the air down the center of the tube made with tongue and roof of mouth.

If the child is making the sound laterally (from the sides of the mouth), it is important to remind the child to shoot the air down the tube between his/her tongue and the roof of the mouth. You will know the sound is lateral because it will sound like the child has lots of saliva in his/her mouth.

**/r/**

I start all production of /r/ with the /er/ sound. Once they have established this sound successfully and consistently, progress usually goes quite smoothly. Speech sessions usually start with 5 /er/ sounds. If these are distorted, please use placement tips.

Tongue: Different tips work for different children. Here are 3.

1. Ask them to put the back of their tongue to the back of their mouth, hold it up and tighten it slightly. Then make sound. An /er/ should result.
2. Ask them to put their tongue in the /k/ position and pull it away from the back of the mouth slightly. Then make sound. An /er/ should result.
3. Ask them to curl their tongue back and put the underside of their tongue against the roof of the mouth.

Lips: Lips should be in a rectangle shape, the one that they naturally make when they produce a ‘sh’ sound.

**‘th’**

It is rare that children need placement tips for this sound. ‘th’ is usually easily to place. Remind the child to put his/her tongue between his teeth.